

# **CENTRE FOR NATIVE EDUCATION**

## **Annual Report 2000-2001**

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### **Introduction**

The 2000-2001 academic year was a busy one for the Centre for Native Education. Manon Tremblay returned from maternity leave in late March 2000 and resumed her position as the Centre's coordinator. After a slow start to the academic year, in terms of student drop-in rates and participation in CNE activities, numbers increased significantly and by the winter semester were back to normal levels.

### **Staff and personnel issues**

A new permanent full-time position was created at the Centre for Native Education and in October 2000, after standard university hiring procedures, Silvana Novembre joined the CNE as the new Department assistant. Silvana comes to us from the School of Graduate Studies and has many years of experience as a front-line worker. She immediately felt at home at the Centre and is proving to be a precious asset for her tireless work and no nonsense approach to her tasks and responsibilities.

### **Student attendance**

In 2000-2001, there was a slight decrease in the Native student population enrolled at Concordia University. The previous academic year, 180 students were registered with the Centre for Native Education. In 2000-2001, there were 168 students. We can offer no explanation to account for the decrease in Native students. However, it may be that the decrease in the population may only have followed the general trend: in 2000-2001, most Quebec universities registered their lowest enrollment rates in years due to booming market conditions. It may be that Native people of university age simply chose the workplace over post-secondary education.

Attendance rates at the Centre for Native Education were also low during the fall semester but considerably picked up during the winter semester. Staff at the CNE believe that the low drop-in rate at the beginning of the academic year can be attributed to the change in personnel during the previous academic year. While Manon Tremblay was on maternity leave, attendance rates dropped sharply. It may be that students were unwilling to seek services from an unfamiliar face. However, the most likely cause for the decrease in student attendance are conflicts that arose between staff and students. At the time, students concerned in the conflicts were actively trying to steer other unsuspecting students away from the Centre. As can be expected, the atmosphere of the Centre was largely affected and some students stopped coming altogether.

Another factor that may have played a significant role in the decreased attendance rate was the chronic absenteeism of the interim coordinator. Hired on a part-time basis for

budget reasons, the interim coordinator was supposed to be present at the Centre between noon and 5 pm. This, however, was rarely the case. On most days, the interim coordinator's presence in the Centre did not exceed two hours per day.

The low drop-in rate continued well into the fall. However, as students realized that the Centre was back to normal, with its original staff and work schedule, drop-in rates started steadily increasing. By the middle of the winter semester, student attendance rates had reached levels set previous to Manon Tremblay's maternity leave.

Out of the 168 students registered with the Centre for Native Education, 124 used the Centre's services during the 2000-2001 academic year. Of the 168, 51 were new students - a number within the range of newly admitted students in previous years. Of the total number of students who used the Centre's services in 2000-2001, 43 students visited once a week or more, an increase of 96% since the 1997-98 academic year! 39 students visited once a month or more and 42 students visited the Centre once a semester or more.

The average number of daily visits during the fall semester was down to 14 visits but rose to 22 visits per day during the winter semester. Between September 5 and December 8, 2000, the Centre received a total of 1199 visits from Native students. Between January 3 and April 13, 2001 the number of visits increased to 1540. As well, the Centre was visited 583 times by non-Native individuals seeking information on Aboriginal people.

### **Student demographics**

As in previous years, the trend in Native student enrollment is highly indicative of Native society. Female students continue to dominate the Native student population: out of 168 students, 117 students were female (70%). As well, although we are seeing younger students every year, the average age of Native students - 33 years old - is higher than that of the general student population. Mohawk students continue to make up the majority of the Native student population with 92 students enrolled in 2000-2001. There is also a strong Cree constituency (23 students).

Two other nations are well represented at Concordia and are probably more worthy of note since their population has steadily increased over the years. The 2000-2001 academic year saw an unprecedented number of Inuit (10) and Mikmaq (13) students enrolled at Concordia, a trend that we hope will continue in the future.

Once again, the overwhelming majority of Native students are enrolled in undergraduate programs with the faculty of Arts and Science. However, the number of students in graduate studies has tremendously increased in the past 5 years. In 1995-96, there were only 2 graduate students. In 2000-2001, there were 22. For a breakdown of the number of Native students per faculty, please see below:

Undergraduate students: 130

Graduate students: 22

Independent students: 16

By faculty:

Arts and Science: 124

Fine Arts: 12

Commerce and Administration: 12

Engineering and Computer Science: 5

### **Programmes and services**

The following are the services offered by the Centre for Native Education:

- Academic advising and referral
- Agenda
- Computer facilities
- Access to on-line library catalogues
- Access to e-mail and the internet
- Documentation centre
- Fax machine
- Group and individual study space
- Income tax return assistance
- kitchen facilities
- listening and referral
- newsletter
- photocopier
- student lounge
- information on scholarships, awards and bursaries
- telephone
- tutor referrals

All these services continue to be widely used by students who visit the Centre. On the **academic advising** front, trouble with registration, late completion of papers and unpaid fees remain time consuming. The Centre has been in regular contact with faculty and staff in many departments to negotiate revised deadlines which are mutually acceptable to all parties. The Centre is also very active in helping new students establish their files with their respective band councils and education authorities to ensure regular and speedy funding. We also help returning students gain readmission after failing their respective programmes and help them find suitable **tutors**. Finally, we provide information and all necessary tools to complete applications for the various **scholarships, awards and bursaries** offered to Native students.

The **Native student agenda** continues to be a hot item with Native students. It is packed with information about the services we offer as well as other essential services at Concordia and in Montreal. The Agenda also provides students with important telephone

numbers and academic deadlines. As in previous years, there were many requests from non-Native students to obtain a copy. Everyone enjoys the simple, advertisement-free, non-political agenda. We are happy about the positive feedback from students and hope to bring more improvements in the future.

A new PC, exclusively for the use of our students, was added to the Centre's **computer facilities** this year. As expected, this was a big hit with students and the Centre's staff has had to resort to a reservation system to ensure that students would get their fair share of access to the computer. Because of the high demand for this computer, and because our students are becoming more computer savvy, the Centre will be working on new guidelines for its use.

The **documentation centre** is still widely used by our students and is gaining more popularity with Concordia faculty, staff and students. However, keeping track of the books is an incessant headache for the Centre's staff. Students routinely fail to return books and tend to keep them for an unacceptable amount of time. Some students have kept books for several months and the situation seems to worsen every year. The Centre is currently revisiting its lending policy and is seriously considering implementing a system where students would be fined for not returning books within a reasonable amount of time.

The Centre for Native Education takes a holistic approach to education. It is our belief that if something is wrong in a student's personal life, the student will not perform optimally in school. In fact, we find that the overwhelming majority of our students who are at risk of failing are experiencing difficulties in their private lives. Consequently, the Centre helps students overcome personal problems by **lending an ear and referring** students to appropriate services when needed. Our Centre has become renowned in the Native community as a place where people can find sympathy for their problems and dilemmas and where help is readily available. As a result, the Centre is increasingly consulted by Native people who are not enrolled at Concordia!

Students who visit the Centre have access to a **fax machine**, a **photocopier** and a **telephone**, all of which are very much in use by students. Students continue to enjoy the convenience of sending and receiving faxes from their education authorities; making copies without standing in long lineups; and placing confidential calls in a quiet and comfortable environment.

As in previous years, one of our most sought-after services is **group and individual study space**. The Centre provides a quiet, friendly and safe space where students can catch up on their readings, do their homework and meet fellow students who are registered in the same classes. The Centre is also increasingly popular for students who wish to meet their tutors in a quiet space on campus.

**Filing for income tax** is a different experience for Native people because of the many dispositions in the Taxation Act that regulate a Native person's income. The Centre for

Native Education offers its services to students who need help in filing their income tax returns. This year, the Centre helped 24 students file their returns.

The Centre for Native Education's **kitchen** is outfitted with a refrigerator, a microwave oven, a coffeemaker, a kettle, a toaster, dishes and utensils. It is one of the most popular services at the Centre since students know that they can store their lunch in the refrigerator and not worry about lugging it everywhere. As in previous years, the Centre keeps food in the pantry at the disposal of students who may not have enough to eat. This service is relatively low-cost (many students who are better off donate food to the Centre) and goes a long way for hungry students – and their families.

Arrowhead News, the Centre's **newsletter**, was revamped last year into a four-page format with regular features and space for students to write opinion pieces and articles. The new format has been a huge success and has received tremendously positive feedback. We hope to get many more students contributing to the newsletter in the coming year.

The **student lounge** is still THE place to meet with other Native students, socialize, take a break in between classes and even take an occasional nap! The Centre for Native Education subscribes to a variety of Aboriginal newspapers and magazines to keep students informed on what is happening in their home communities. The student lounge is a high traffic area much appreciated by our students who often feel isolated in Montreal and need to connect with other Native people. It is very often the place where students meet other students in the same field of study and where study groups start forming, a definite advantage to all involved.

### **Special activities**

#### **Orientation/breakfast week 2000-2001**

Our Orientation effort was not an overwhelming success this year. 25 students participated in our annual breakfast week. The low turn out is due to several factors which have already been hinted at in this report.

#### **Christmas potluck**

Our Christmas potluck was significantly more successful than Orientation with 45 students showing up to partake in the good cheer.

#### **First Peoples Studies**

Perhaps the most important undertaking of the academic year was the creation of a committee to look into the possibility of creating a First Peoples Studies major at Concordia University. The committee was struck in November 2000 and is composed of interested staff, faculty and students who all feel that such a program is long overdue at Concordia. From the start, the Centre for Native Education has taken a leading role in the work of this committee and there is no doubt that the next academic year will be full of interesting prospects.

### **Lectures and interviews**

The Centre's coordinator, Manon Tremblay, is often called upon to give lectures and interviews to the media on a variety of subjects of Native interest. This year was particularly busy in that respect. The coordinator spoke to students in Continuing Education about Canada's Aboriginal People. She was also invited to speak in a Religion class about Native spirituality and in an Anthropology class on contemporary problems of Native people. As well, lectures were given at other educational institutions such as Royal West Academy and at non-profit organizations such as the Centre d'Education des Adultes de la Petite Bourgogne and the Federation des Femmes du Quebec.

Interviews were also given to newspaper and television reporters. Manon Tremblay was interviewed by CFCF 12 during the winter semester on the overthrowing of the Native Friendship Centre's administration and she appeared on Global Television Network on the blood quantum policies enacted by the Kahnawake Mohawk Council. She also gave interviews to the McGill Daily on Native Christmas Traditions and was featured in separate pieces in the Eastern Door and the Link about the creation of the First Peoples Studies committee.

### **Conferences**

Manon Tremblay attended two conferences on Native Education during this academic year. The first conference, RETAIN 2000, was held in Prince George, B. C. and brought together 600 Aboriginal people who provide services to post-secondary Native students. Retention is the ordre du jour at this conference and many institutions shared their success stories and strategies in how to keep Native students on the right track. Other useful workshops touched on topics such as how far do we go to help a student in need or how to understand and manage student anger.

The second conference Manon Tremblay attended was the Coming Together Conference held in Winnipeg in October 2000. This conference's purpose was to bring together teachers and student services staff to discuss the needs of Native students and how best to meet the challenge of meeting those needs. Both conferences provided much needed insight into what other institutions are up to as well as an opportunity to network with dedicated people who genuinely care for the welfare and academic success of Aboriginal students.

### **Other issues**

#### **Space**

During the summer of 2000, the Centre for Native Education underwent some much needed renovations. Walls were replastered and repainted, new carpet was laid and offices were moved around to better accommodate the needs of staff and students as well as maximize the use of available space. The coordinator's office, for example, was moved to a location where confidentiality would be better assured.

One of the long outstanding issues in terms of space remains the lack of heat in the winter and the overpowering heat in the summer. It is difficult to work effectively when the

ambient temperature in most of the Centre hovers around 12 degrees celsius during most of the winter months and can reach as high as 35 degrees celsius during the peak of summer. Repeated calls to upgrade the heating system have been largely ignored and the Health and Safety Office has done nothing to help us rectify the situation. It seems that as long as the Centre is housed in a rented annex, staff and students must suffer in silence. It is unbelievable that in this day and age, people are forced to work in such conditions. The Centre's staff will continue to issue complaints to the appropriate authorities until acceptable temperatures are reached in the Centre. At the moment, we must resort to portable ceramic heaters and heavy sweaters in the winter in order to keep warm. Unfortunately, V annex is not wired for the use of heating devices and physical resources discourages their use. By using these heaters, we are seriously taxing our electrical system.

### **Conclusion**

This was not the best of years for the Centre for Native Education in terms of overall student attendance. However, student drop-in rates increased steadily and reached accepted levels during the winter term. We are confident that 2001-2002 will prove to be an interesting year in many ways. We will continue to reach out to students, encourage them to seek our services. And there is every indication that the Native Studies initiative will yield exciting results in the coming year.